

What and that humans do:
Participating in the meaning of life, a contributor's critique

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to critically examine the metaphysical presuppositions that prevail in Stewart's answer to the question "are we in the midst of a developmental process" as expressed in his statement "that humanity has discovered the trajectory of past evolution and can see how it is likely to continue in the future".

What and that humans do

Humans select certain elements out of the local dynamics they are confronted with and translate them in records. These selections are part of objectification processes and have a sequential nature. This means that though a selected element can be 'recorded', this does not imply that the record itself has an absolute, 'objective' status. Also, to repeat a particular selection only implies that the objectification procedure is repeated, not that the record will be exactly the same. Of course, some records will be inscribed in a system that, for reasons of visibility and communication, will require some level of stability. When rendered visible and communicable in a system, records can be operationalized. This is what humans do.

What humanity does –and this can be extrapolated from Stewart's argument –is relate to a global system in which the operationalization of records aims at capturing the organization of the global system. This requires the cooperation effort of *all* humans. Moreover it requires an effort founded on competition-driven selection situated at larger developmental scales. In the end however, competition will be obsolete. It is the moment at which the global society will emerge. This moment has however yet to come.

Now is a good time to ask the question whether we indeed are "in the midst of a developmental process?" It is, within Stewart's metaphysical perspective, a *necessary question* to ask. The answer, i.e. "that humanity has discovered the trajectory of past evolution and can see how it is likely to continue in the future", represents a mere *possibility* as we can never be certain about the destination of the trajectory. In fact, this kind of uncertainty is exactly the same as the one expressed in perspectives addressing the *increasing complexity* of society. So what are the consequences of taking up the perspective Stewart presents?

When addressing the necessity of the question, the perspective '*that* humans do', *that* they engage in objectification procedures, *that* they *contribute* to a complex society, has to make room for the perspective '*what* humans do', how and why they *participate* in society, acquire competences and learn to be 'objective' in a society where complexity 'increases'. In the latter perspective, the questioning activity cannot be but necessary and static because the records to be inscribed and the system in which they are inscribed will only allow 'all knowing' global descriptions of the Laplacean demon kind (Matsuno & Salthe, 1992). Such global descriptions however, have a very particular characteristic, i.e. they are relatively absolute. As complexity is confined to the status of 'always increasing', all global descriptions will fit this definition absolutely and the questions that pertain to this absoluteness will be necessary. Relative to this absoluteness, all answers to necessary questions cannot be but possible. The rationale here is that the realm of possible answers is the only realm left over where human evolvability can further 'develop' – as a possible answer. This however, renders the possibility of a questioning activity, especially with regard to the possibility of evolvability and development, immobile. Let's put the perspective more concrete in the context of Stewart's argument: a trajectory is identified and deemed necessary for the evolvability and development of humanity; though the end of this trajectory is known absolutely, i.e. it is inscribed in a likely future that runs analogous with the perspective that complexity in society increases, the answers are merely possibilities relative to this absolute position and in essence disconnected from an engaged entity that can ask possible questions. Only 'humanity' can pose necessary questions, not 'humans'. That is one perspective on the matter.

So what would become possible when we subscribe to the perspective that allows for the possibility of the question and the necessity of the answer, i.e. the answer always being the givenness of complexity, more precisely *that* there is complexity? Well, then the perspective *that* humans do, can to its fullest extent, be further explored. *That* humans do is not about part-taking in a whole, not about cooperative organization, which is merely the operationalization of "an unhappy marriage between atomism and a materialistic (and often mystical) holism in which a predominantly atomistic and functionalist conception of the organism *per se* is coupled with a holistic conception of a 'central directing agency' conceived as a material entity – the so called 'genetic programme' – which is supposed to determine, order and unify the atomic units and events" (Webster & Goodwin, 1982, p. 16). Within such a perspective, which is the one that subscribes to increasing complexity, the whole coincides with the parts, the consequence of which is that the organism as a structured entity cannot claim its place. *That* humans do, is exactly about taking up the perspective that humans can appear as structured entities, meaning that they can appear as engaged individuals, not statically concerned with possible answers trying to tackle society's apparent increasing complexity, but that they can dynamically invest in a questioning activity that allows for the possibility of asking questions pertaining to the matter *that* there is complexity, *what* this exactly is, is not so much of interest. To put it in other words, records can be operationalized, they need not be. This is just one of the possibilities.

The rationale behind Stewart's argument concerning the meaning of life is directed at humanity and directs humans to organize themselves in a cooperative/participative way. The aim of this commentary was to lay bare that Stewart's position gives voice to a perspective that needs to be taken up as perspective. Other perspectives are possible. The meaning of life need not be situated in participative practices that are in need of competent and competitive behaviour. Complexity is here and always has been here. It is tangibly present as 'the' necessary answer, also for people that, while unable to participate fully to society due to exclusion mechanisms, do contribute to it. It are those contributions that are in danger to be stripped away from the meaning of life for 'humanity'.

References

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